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feature article

Diversity in the Legal Profession

by Elizabeth Neeley

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 12.7% of Nebraska's population is African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian American, or another minority group defined by the U.S. Census. According to both the 2000 U.S. Census and the Nebraska State Bar Association, only 2.4% of the state's attorneys identify themselves as ethnic or racial minorities. In fact, of the 4,800 attorneys in the state of Nebraska, only 115 identify themselves as ethnic or racial minorities and none of the attorneys that identified themselves as ethnic or racial minorities live west of Lincoln, (in the eastern third of the state). These factors have led to fears on the part of many of Nebraska's leaders that the state's minority court consumers, both civil and criminal, face a court system that is unrepresentative and likely perceived as hostile.

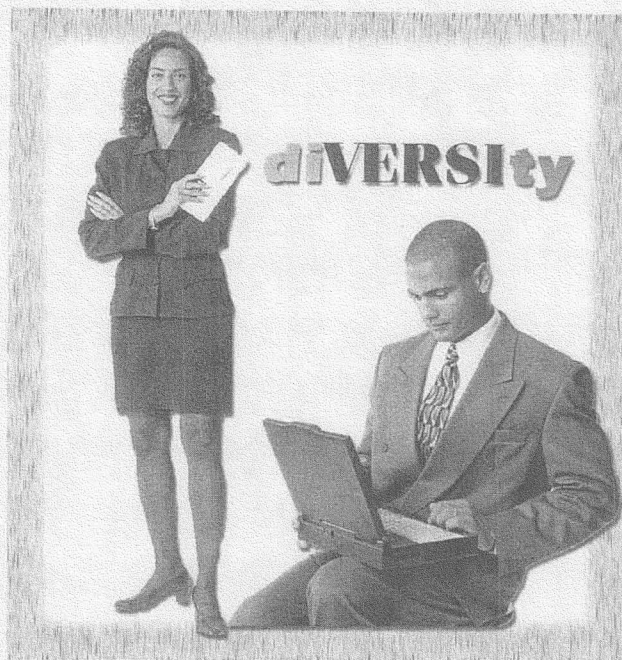
Data collected by the Minority and Justice Task Force indicate that these perceptions have basis in fact. In 2002, the

Elizabeth Neeley



Elizabeth M. Neeley is the interim project director for the Minority and Justice Implementation Committee. As a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln she worked as the Research Coordinator for the Minority and Justice Task Force. Her efforts with the Task Force earned her the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Graduate Research Assistant of the Year

Award in 2002. She has written several articles examining race and gender discrimination in the courts.



Minority and Justice Task Force traveled to communities across Nebraska soliciting testimony from the public on issues relevant to race and ethnicity in the courts. One of the primary problems identified across the state was the lack of diversity in the legal profession and court system:

"I did not see anybody of any color, black or Hispanic, they were all white, they were all elderly men. All of them had gray hair. They were just, you know—I do not feel comfortable there."

—*Testimony from 2002 Public Hearing*

"People's perceptions are that when they go in to any system and they do not see anybody that looks like them, and that's whether they are African American, Native American, Hispanic, Latino, Asian, when they come in that system, if they don't see people that look like them administering those systems, working in those systems, then I think the perception automatically [is] that they're not going to get fair treatment."

—*Testimony from 2002 Public Hearing*

"I know that I never met a Hispanic lawyer until I got to college and I sought one out. I mean, it's just pretty ridiculous that you have to look for one to find one."

—*Testimony from Minority Law Student Focus Group*

Statements such as these illustrate that diversity in the legal profession is critical to the public's confidence in and the success of our judicial system.

Given the substantial disparity and the concerns this disparity has raised across Nebraska's communities, the

DIVERSITY IN LEGAL PROFESSION

Minority and Justice Task Force conducted a study to understand the barriers that inhibit Nebraska's legal community from reflecting the racial and ethnic breakdown of Nebraska's population. More specifically, the Task Force examined trends in the current recruitment, hiring, retention, and advancement opportunities available in Nebraska, as perceived by those working in the legal profession.

Results show that minority Bar members are more likely to believe that there are fewer opportunities in private firms for minority law school graduates and that little effort is made to recruit and retain those minority Bar members who are hired. Moreover, minority Bar members are more likely to believe that they have fewer opportunities for mentoring and networking and are less likely to be satisfied with their opportunities for professional advancement. Given these perceptions it is not surprising that few minority attorneys stay in Nebraska to practice. As one minority attorney succinctly explains the situation:

It is true that minorities leave the state because there are no opportunities and no one is making an effort to give opportunities.

—*An anonymous Nebraska attorney*

The 2004 Diversity Summit

The Minority and Justice Implementation Committee, established by the Nebraska Supreme Court and the

Nebraska State Bar Association to address issues of racial and ethnic bias in the state's court and legal systems, hopes to change this perception by establishing efforts to expand employment opportunities for minorities interested in pursuing a career in law in the state of Nebraska.

The Implementation Committee will be hosting a 2004 Diversity Summit for regional minority law students and legal employers in Nebraska. The half-day event will be held on Friday October 22, 2004 in Omaha at the Hilton, 1005 Dodge Street. The Summit will offer concurrent and joint sessions for both legal employers in Nebraska as well as minority law students attending law schools in Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and South Dakota.

In addition to raising awareness about the value of diversity among Nebraska's legal community, the 2004 Diversity Summit offers legal employers the opportunity to learn best practices in the hiring and retention of minority attorneys, while providing minority law students from Nebraska and surrounding states with the opportunity to learn more about legal employment opportunities in Nebraska. 